HEDON TOWN COUNCIL

SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Social Media is a complex and ever-developing medium. The objective of this document is also to provide an overview of Social Media and outline a Council's potential position on some aspects of its use. In addition, it includes guidelines on Councillors' responsibilities when using such channels of communication.

1.2 Social media is a generic term for the electronic sharing of opinions, discussions, stories, video, pictures, information and even gossip. It can be categorised into six types: blogs; wikis; social networks; forums; podcasts; and content communities. The key feature of such systems is that they can be accessed in different ways – via computers, tablets and phones. Examples of popular social media tools include: Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, You Tube, Pinterest, Snip.it, Linked In and Google Plus. Groupings of interest are a natural feature of the development of such systems with people with similar interests being attracted to share information.

1.3 Social media has the following characteristics:
- Covers a wide variety of formats, including text, video, photographs, audio
- Allows messages to flow between many different types of device; PCs, phones and tablets (eg IPad)
- Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment or just view information
- Speeds and broadens the flow of information
- Provides one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications
- Allows communication to take place in real time or intermittently

1.4 Whilst these tools are very useful to enable the sharing of information quickly with other people, there are downsides:
- The information in most cases is shared in the public domain and can be viewed by anyone in the world. In many cases registration to view the content may not be necessary. Registering may only be required should participation and posting to a site be allowed.
- Groups on specific themes can be set up easily and posts then edited by the owners of that group to reflect their single interest, ensuring theirs is the only voice heard. There is no guarantee of truth and ill-informed comment and gossip is as likely to be found there as useful information.
- The nature of these tools is that information is shared immediately and it is all too easy to respond without thinking and potentially inflaming a situation.

Information can then be shared with other sites and be spread far beyond the intended audience.

- It is also very easy to spend a lot of time viewing and responding to messages that would outweigh the value gained in the first place.

1.5 The Town Council can make use of social media to disseminate information but shall carefully control their use in order to minimise the risks as stated above. It is expected that information can be disseminated by the Emergency Planning Chairman if necessary.

1.6 Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts using any of the tools available but should ensure they are clearly identified as personal and they should not in any way imply that they reflect the Council's view.

1.7 Councillors should at all times present a professional image and not disclose anything of a confidential nature. Comments of a derogatory, proprietary or libellous nature should not be made and care should be taken to avoid guesswork, exaggeration and colourful language. If such comments are made it is at the Councillor's own risk.

1.8 The following statutes have a bearing on, or impinge on the rationale of, Social Media so far as a Council is concerned: Data Protection Act 2018, Freedom of Information Act 2000, Human Rights Act 1998.

2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Social media can be used by a Council as an effective and measurable way to provide information, achieve resident engagement and attract publicity.

2.2 As with all forms of communication, a strategy is helpful to ensure fair use, promote willing compliance and ensure corporate responsibility. The aims of this Social Media Policy should ensure:
- Engagement with individuals and communities and the successful promotion of council-based services through the use of social media;
- A consistent approach is adopted and maintained;
- That Council information remains secure and is not compromised through such use;
- That users operate within existing policies, guidelines and relevant legislation; and
- That the Council's reputation is not damaged or adversely affected.

2.3 Social media activity isn't something that stands alone, to be effective it needs to integrate as part of the general communications mix. Any planned campaigns, promotions and activities can be plugged into social media platforms to increase reach and exposure.

3.0 POLICY STATEMENT

3.1 It is acknowledged that there is significant potential in social media and that this can bring great advantages. The responsible, corporate use of social media is growing and the following can be applied equally to Officers and Members.

3.2 A policy provides a structured approach to using social media to ensure that it is effective, lawful and does not compromise Council information or computer systems/networks.

3.3 Council users must use social media sensibly and responsibly, and ensure that its use will not adversely affect the Council or its business, nor be damaging to its reputation and credibility or otherwise conflict with any internal policies.

3.4 The following guidelines could be applied to online participation and sets out the standards of behaviour expected as a representative of the Council:

- Be aware of and recognise your responsibilities identified in the Social Media Policy;
- Remember that you are responsible for the content you publish on any form of social media;
- Never give out personal details such as home address and telephone numbers. Ensure that you handle any personal or sensitive information in line with Council policy and the Data Protection Act;
- Individual Councillors using social media for the purposes of their role should use a disclaimer. In such circumstances councillors must not imply they are speaking for their Council. They should avoid use of a council e-mail address, logos or other council identification and make it clear that what they say is representative of their personal views only. Where possible, they should include a standard disclaimer, such as "Statements and opinions here are my own and do not necessarily represent the council's policies or opinions".
- Everyone must be conscious of their obligations and should comply with other relevant council policies when using social media. For example, they should be careful not to breach council confidentiality and proprietary information policies. For councillors this could be a Code of Conduct issue, for employees it could be a disciplinary matter.
- Respect must be shown to all. Council users should be respectful of the authority, its members and its employees. Derogatory comments are always wrong and can have repercussions.

4.0 RESPONSIBILITIES

4.1 Initially a Council will usually establish a preferred medium in order to quickly disseminate information and/or create interest. The Town Clerk shall be the designated Council owner of any feed or other Social Media channel. Trying to take on a range of social media at the outset may be counter-productive. New activities of any kind have resource implications and badly engaging with social media will not be helpful. Only the Town Clerk or member of staff under the direction of the Town Clerk are permitted to post material on a social media website in the council's name and on the Council's behalf.

4.2 Individual Councillors are at liberty to set up their own accounts and they should ensure they comply with the Council's Policy statement

5.0 GUIDANCE FOR COUNCILLORS – SOCIAL MEDIA AND MEETINGS

5.1 Councillors should keep residents informed of local issues and the use of social media can help with this. It has been known for councillors to use social media during meetings. Councillors will wish to bear in mind the purpose council meetings and the expectations of the public in terms of their representatives attentively listening to and participating in debates and decision-making. Councillors will therefore be conscious of the possible public perception created by the use of social media during meetings. That having been said, effective and timely communication following a meeting will be great interest to those who follow council business.

5.2 Below are some extra guidelines for councillors to consider for the use of social media during meetings:
- Standing Orders may allow the use of handheld devices and laptops during meetings however the use of such devices should have the intention of improving communication, not of interrupting or distracting anyone taking part;
- Any tweets/blogs which are allowed during council meetings should refer to the discussions which are taking place at the meeting – tweeting/blogging about other subjects will serve only to show the public and other attendees that there is a lack of engagement with Council business;
- Councillors have a responsibility to take council business seriously and it is not appropriate for members to use social media to tease or insult other members. The public attending meetings expect debate and to be informed about council business, not to witness petty arguments; and
- If a councillor breaks the law whilst using social media (for example by posting something defamatory, he or she will be personally responsible.

6.0 MEASURES – CAN SUCCESS BE MEASURED

6.1 A Council will be interested in measures of engagement. This can be determined by the number of followers, subscribers, re-posts and likes eg Facebook and Twitter can provide these statistics. There are sustainability factors to consider. The potential environmental and sustainability implications of social media have to be considered. It might be recognised that the regulated use of social media has the potential to make a positive impact on communities and social wellbeing. By establishing greater links with members of the public, community groups, partners and stakeholders, through social networking, there is potential scope for more open communication, increased ability to share information and even improve service delivery.

6.2 The cost-effectiveness of this form of media may be difficult to quantify over time. Certainly, at the outset, it may be a cost-consumer. Usage in the form of followers etc may therefore be a key measurement of success.

**Hedon Town Council adopted this Policy
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